

A MAN OF IDEAS

BY DOROTHY CANFIELD

AUTHOR OF "THE AWAKENING," "THE HOUSE WITH THE WOODBINE," ETC.

WHEN I turned into the old deserted road, after a scramble over high upland pastures that had tried my horse's temper, I was startled to see smoke rising from the chimney of the old Elten house, for nobody had lived in it since the death of my great-grandfather. I was startled, but not at all alarmed; for there are no tramps in our mountains, and I know all the valley people very well.

More than this, I was a little indignant. The Elten house belongs to my Grandaunt Abigail, and I thought it was a mean trick in anybody to use her house just because she is crippled with rheumatism and can't get around to look after her property. So, I rode up to the door, and, leaning from my saddle, knocked on it with my riding-whip.

I will confess that I was not only startled but a little alarmed when it was opened by a man I had never seen in my life before. He looked inquiringly at me; but in just a minute I saw that he wasn't anybody to be afraid of. You could tell that by one look at him. He was unshaven and haggard, but looked as though he was meant to be comfortable and middle-aged—the kind of a person that your aunts have married.

At first he had a hunted look in his eyes. I had never seen anybody with that look, though you often read about it, but I recognized it the instant I saw it. But when he discovered that I was just a girl, and alone, he seemed relieved, and asked what he could do for me. I thought he was pretty cool.

"My great-aunt, Miss Calkins, owns this house," I said. "Seeing smoke as I rode past, I—"

He interrupted me. "I'll be very glad to pay any rent she wishes for it."

"No," I said with dignity. "No, it's not that. My great-aunt has plenty of money. It's sentiment. She will never allow any one to live in the house since her father, my great-grandfather, died here."

"Isn't there any way?" he asked earnestly.

"None," I answered firmly. "You must go."

He hesitated for a moment, looking down the road that led to the valley and the village, and seeming so miserable that I was sorry for him. Then he said:

"Look here, Miss—Calkins, I presume?" My name is not Calkins, but I let it pass. "You look like a good-hearted girl who'd be kind to a man in distress. Let me tell you my unhappy story and see if you can make up your mind to turn me out of my haven of peace. I'll tie your horse to the tree, and you can sit on the steps. I have no furniture in the house, or I'd ask you in."

I wasn't going to get off my horse and sit down that way with a man I'd never laid eyes on, even if he did look as though he might be my uncle by marriage; but I was curious to hear what was the matter with him, so we compromised. I went on sitting on my saddle, and he carried two high old saw-horses from the barn, put a plank across them, and sat on that. This brought him up about on a level with me, and we talked quite comfortably; at least, he did, for I only listened.

"Three years ago," he began, "I was as peaceful and happy a man as you could well imagine. I was a teacher in one of the public high schools in New York, and I had worked up until my salary was eighteen hundred dollars a year. I was, and am, a bachelor of simple tastes, and this was amply suffi-



I WAS CURIOUS TO HEAR WHAT WAS THE MATTER WITH HIM, SO WE COMPROMISED

cient for my modest needs. But I am of a frugal turn of mind, and I wished to lay by something for my old age. My rainy-day fund did not grow as fast as I liked, and in an unhappy moment I wondered if there was not some way of earning little extra sums to go into the savings-bank. One day, in a street-car, I noticed an advertisement for a new variety of face-powder with a picture of the box used. It occurred to me that if the box were a little different in shape it could be made to fit exactly the trademark which the company had chosen, and that the whole would be a unique and striking feature of the product. When I reached home I wrote out my idea, with a rough sketch of what I meant, and sent it to the company, not expecting any reply. Imagine my surprise and delight when ten days later I received a handsome check from the face-powder people, with an equally handsome letter thanking me for my suggestion.

"I was like a tiger, kept in domesticity, that had tasted blood. As I deposited the check in the savings-bank and watched the clerk make the entry, I felt my mind crouching ready for another spring; and when I went out on the street I sprang—if an ex-professor of English may be allowed a little license in speech! High above me on a fourteen-story building was an advertisement of a certain brand of cigars. I did not smoke at the time, nor do I now; but instantly there sprang into my mind a little couplet, inimitably droll, describing the passion of a confirmed smoker for this variety of cigar. I can say 'inimitably droll' without any false shame, for I am firmly convinced that I have not really been myself at any time in the last three years. Some obsession from a wandering spirit must have come upon me. In no other way can I account for the strange madness which descended on me, and from which I am just recovering—a madness, as I may characterize it, of ideas.

"I sent the couplet to the cigar-makers, who at once caused me to be visited by their agent, offering me another handsome sum for the rights to the verse; and in a month's time it was blazoned everywhere on the bill-boards, was in every one's mouth, and had even

attained the dubious dignity of allusion on the stage of the vaudeville theaters. Like Byron, I awoke to find myself famous. Advertising-agents waited for me on every corner, trying to lure me into some contract for exclusive work for them; but my muse was a coy one and followed no set path. I might be racking my brain in vain for some bright idea about a well-known make of shoes, when suddenly there would dart into my head the most ingenious method for the simplification of the system for securing tickets at a crowded soda-water fountain. At first I was chary of parting with such ideas, and offered them to a number of soda-water purveyors at once, making them bid against one another; but I soon grew careless in the flood of new devices. Why trouble to market each one to the best advantage? Apparently there were plenty more.

"In an ever-increasing tide they swept upon me, almost submerging me, sometimes, in their furious haste. I could not cross the ferry to my bachelor flat in Brooklyn that I did not see how ocean liners could be brought to their docks with greater ease and less expense. At school a careless boy whose necktie had slipped loose brought to my mind a contrivance for holding it firm. You can judge of the success, from a financial standpoint, of my ideas when I tell you that that one small matter of the necktie-holder brought me half of what had been up to that time my yearly income.

"Very soon, however, I dropped my school work and devoted myself entirely to my new and absorbing occupation. 'Absorbing' is a mild word for the very frenzy of ideas which burst upon me in a wild storm as soon as the shelter of my dull daily task was gone. People used to ask me, 'How *do* you ever think up all these wonderful improvements?' And I answered in helpless exasperation, 'How can I *help* it when everything I see suggests one to me!'

"My bedroom opened out on a vista of the backs of apartment-houses, and the sums I realized from improvements suggested by that view alone would take your breath away. My wash-day-in-a-flat contrivances alone amounted to more than I had hoped to have to retire on; and my fire-escape-baby-playhouse idea is to be

seen in every American city that boasts an apartment-house.

"I am not naturally ambitious, and very soon I was so well satisfied with my capital that I decided to retire, marry, and settle down. A certain young lady of my acquaintance—no longer extremely young, it is true—had long held my affections, but I had considered marriage unwise on my limited income. Now, however, there was no obstacle, and as soon as she returned to the city I meant to arrange the matter for an early date. Although I had never spoken definitely to her of marriage, I was sure that we understood each other.

"With these pleasing prospects in my mind, I called together the various mercantile gentlemen whose acquaintance I had so pleasantly made in my meteoric career, and told them that I was about to retire. They expressed much amiable regret, and with mutual hand-shakings the company began to separate. As I talked to one, however, I was seized with an inspiration as to the way in which the arrangement of the pockets in his coat might be improved, and in a jiffy a tailor's agent had bought the notion. This made me think of a plan for a prize contest among women for ideas on 'men's clothes as women would like to have them,' and the editor of a trade journal was so much pleased with the idea that he contracted for it at once. To make a long and unhappy story short, in ten minutes my ideas were flowing as rapidly as ever, the advertising-agents hung about me like harpies, and my poor brain was sodden with fatigue.

"I then determined that I must shut myself away from all society that might suggest salable ideas. I retired to my sister's quiet apartment. In vain! I happened to see the janitor distributing the mail, and was taken at once by a vision of a method infinitely simpler. Mentioning this to my sister at the table, I was overheard by the maid, who told the janitor, and three days later I was waited upon by a delegate of the Janitors' Union, asking my price for the idea.

"Everything about me suggested new methods, better and quicker. My senses reeled! I longed for some simple, human life, but my madness lay heavy and inexorable upon me. I was no longer a

human being. I had become an idea-machine. The society of sweet little children was blighted for me. I could not play with my little nieces without being tormented with a thousand improvements possible in the manufacture of toys. I could not sleep, racked and harried as I was by new designs for spring mattresses, and the most devilishly sly contrivances for folding beds. I could not read—book-rests, new forms of binding, new methods of indexing, made me faint and dizzy. Even my religion was no solace. Different methods for marshaling the choir, improved sounding-boards, a better way to arrange the steps to the pulpit, new systems of draftless ventilation, all rendered my very soul arid and wretchedly impervious to the spiritual comfort of the church.

"I tried to travel, but that was the worst of all. The rapid motion seemed to stimulate my already feverish brain to an unholy activity, and I could draw no free breath. My poor tortured mind was one mad jumble of new switch-systems and arrangements for putting up the upper berth all made up, for a more accurately devised conductor's punch, and for devices of swinging tables in the dining-car so that the motion of the train would not disturb the diners. It was frightful, horrible! The remembrance fills me with terror. But I had not yet known the ultimate anguish.

"When Marion Percy came back to town, I fled at once to her, hoping that this strong emotion would shatter the walls of the mental prison in which I was so helplessly immured. The sight of her sweet and gentle face was like cool water to a man dying of thirst. I felt my madness depart from me, and as I looked upon her welcoming smile my soul was lifted up to realms of light and beauty which I had never dreamed of entering.

"'Marion, my dear and only love,' I began, stretching out my arms longingly to her, 'I have come—'

"I stopped, horror-struck, my arms frozen in their absurd position. A lock of her pretty brown hair was loose, and through my mind had instantly darted the 'crinkled hairpin' idea—an idea so far-reaching in its universality that you are probably using them at this minute,

the accursed things!—if you will pardon the freedom of my speech, a liberty which should be allowed to a man who has suffered much and who is speaking of his sufferings.

"As I say, there I stood, paralyzed with horror, and there stood Marion, her sweet face raised in anxious questioning. I began again. 'Marion, my darling,' I said, and stopped once more. As she had started to her feet on my entrance, the movement had loosened a hook of her dress, and all my visions of a gloriously rounded life with the woman I love were swept from my mind by the hideous conception of the 'see-that-hump?' hook and eye—an abhorred object which is probably fastening your riding-habit at this instant.

"As the full realization of the meaning of this last terrible affliction burst over my despairing mind, my taut nerves broke into shreds, and I fled out of the house, out of the street, and out of the city, into the blessed country, bareheaded, gesticulating and shouting like a madman—as indeed I was.

"What has happened since then I do not rightly know, since I have scarcely been myself, resisting in vain the heartless pursuit of advertising-agents, who, from time to time, have sought me out in my misery. There was a period of total blank; and then, a month ago, I found myself in this house, sane and in my right mind once more. I mean to settle here, raise enough beans for my simple needs, and never forsake my nook of safety. Now, Miss—Perkins, I believe?—after that story, can you have the heart to turn me out again into a world which has proved such a place of torment to me?"

He stopped and regarded me anxiously. I sat on my horse and meditated.

If I said nothing to Grandaunt Abigail she would never know, and if he *had* had such a hard time—but what an absurd story! How could he expect anybody to believe such a perfectly preposterous—

Suddenly I had an inspiration. "See here," I said sympathetically, "why wouldn't it be a good idea—"

My blood ran cold to notice the look of agonized pain which came into his eyes at the word. He sat up straight, holding one hand to his head, and pointing at my saddle with the other.

"If you had," he murmured huskily, in a voice of despair I shall never forget—"if you had two buckles on that holster you could adjust it to fit any sized gun by turning the lower flap higher or lower." At this he leaped to the ground, his face as white as my handkerchief. "Oh! Oh!" he moaned miserably. "Why don't you bring the girth up over that first strap and under the buckle, and then there would be no strain on that frayed place?"

He suddenly burst out into loud groans of horror, and began running up the road as fast as he could go. Half-way up he stopped short, and came racing back, his face twisted dreadfully.

"A combination cross-barred shoe and an outer weight would cure your horse's interference," he cried like one in awful pain.

Away he ran again up the road, tearing at his gray hair in a frenzy. I sat perfectly still, too surprised to stir; but at the top of the hill, just before he disappeared, he turned around and shook his fist at me, calling out:

"Oh, *why* did you ever come here?"

He added two dreadful words which I cannot repeat. It seemed incredible! Right there before my Grandaunt Abigail's house a man had sworn at me!